

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND THE EMPOWERMENT ZONE

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Abstract:

The City of Atlanta Empowerment Zone project, from application to implementation has been one of the most citizen intensive processes in the history of planning in Atlanta. The surge pre-Olympic development benefited empowerment zone implementation projects and helped market trends to favor intown development. EPA non-attainment limitations favoured redevelopment on existing infrastructure, and the City's Renaissance program emphasizes those goals. New development in Atlanta, since the Olympics has surpassed expectations, resulting in new challenges such as gentrification, demand for increased municipal services and new quality of life amenities. These new challenges require new solutions.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Providing increased opportunities for Atlanta citizen input has been a cornerstone of City policy, especially since 1975. This is especially true in community planning efforts in all city neighborhoods. In 1975 Mayor Maynard Jackson created Neighborhood Planning Units for all 230 of the cities neighborhoods. These neighborhoods were clustered into 24 Neighborhood Planning Units (NPU's) with very distinct boundaries (*See figure 2*). The NPU's provide maximum opportunity for citizens to provide input into the City's operation of day-to-day government operation and projects, and most importantly, maximum participation in the City's Comprehensive Development Plan which is produced annually. The City's Bureau of Planning assigns staff planners to provide planning assistance and technical assistance for the NPU's. In addition to attending the NPU's monthly meeting, the staff planner works with the NPU on city-wide planning issues and planning issues that are pertinent to that particular NPU. Many national surveys have ranked Atlanta's citizen participation activities as excellent with regard to the NPU structure.

The Atlanta Project (TAP) was another model used in the city to further maximize citizen participation in community planning. TAP's building block for community participation was neighborhood clusters, which overlap with school districts. It was through these clusters that TAP was able to give and receive input from a neighborhood or neighborhoods with common issues. The Empowerment Zone Project utilized cluster information during its inception to further maximize community input into the city's planning process.

NPU System - A Building Block for Creation of the Empowerment Zone

The City's Empowerment Zone (EZ) project utilized the NPU system and its constituent neighborhoods as the building block for community participation in planning the EZ project. The EZ project designated 30 neighborhoods in the NPU's to define the EZ boundary (*see figure 4*). City staff and neighborhood representatives worked together to design the EZ application and the process for its administration. To maintain citizen participation throughout the ten year life

of the project, the City and the neighborhoods created a citizen based Community Empowerment Board (CEB) of 69 members with representatives from each neighborhood, each of which had a poverty rate of 35% or greater. This board was initially charged with selecting the area to be proposed for Empowerment Zone designation.

The CEB was designated as the entity in the application, which had final approval of the zone's composition, development of strategic plan and the project's implementation plan.

Neighborhood wide citizen input was sought through four working community groups: Economic Development, Public Safety, Human Services and Community Development. These working groups were supported by a technical team (city departments, public and non profit agencies, and loaned staff from private sector companies, and by a resource team (implementation organizations) which consisted of staff from city, county, state, federal and private organizations which could provide leveraging funds and resources for the EZ project.

THE ATLANTA EMPOWERMENT ZONE

In 1994 the City of Atlanta received the designation as an Urban Empowerment Zone from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The final zone configuration consisted 9.29 square miles, including 23 census tracts with a poverty rate of 35% or more. The total number of persons residing in the zone was 49,998 of which the majority were African Americans, with more than 50% of this group being female (*see figure 3*). At the time of the grant the zone was an area characterized by deteriorating older residential areas alongside vacant and obsolete industrial areas.

As a designated Empowerment Zone, the City was awarded a \$100 million grant and \$150 million in business tax incentives to develop and implement sustainable programs and projects that tangibly and quantifiably would improve the lives and living conditions of citizens in the Zone. In addition to grants, the Zone is able to provide special tax incentives for qualified businesses operating in the Zone, businesses that either relocate or expand within the Zone and hire Zone residents.

The benchmarks established by the Community Empowerment Board were:

- Expanding employment and investment opportunities
- Creating safe and livable communities
- Lifting youth and families out of poverty
- Providing adequate housing for all.

CATALYST FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE EMPOWERMENT ZONE

1. 1996 Olympics

At the same time the City was focusing on creating the EZ, planning had commenced for the 1996 Olympic games. To prepare for the Olympic games the City established a non-profit corporation to manage Olympic related development in the City. The Corporation for Olympic Development (CODA) was responsible for the mission of preparing the City for the '96 games. CODA's mission was also to use the Olympic experience to enhance the quality of life for intown neighborhood residents that would be impacted most by the new development coming to the City as a result of the Games. As a result CODA prepared a master plan for Olympic

development and identified 9 intown neighborhoods that would be most affected directly by development and activities associated with the games. Of the neighborhoods identified, 7 fell within the boundaries of the EZ. CODA provided initial assessment and plans for improvements in these neighborhoods of which infrastructure improvements directly related to the Games were the first to be implemented. The Olympics injected. \$3.5 billion into the Georgia economy over 6 years and created approximately 84,000 new jobs in the construction and service industries, \$2 billion was spent on new building and renovations. The City also approved a \$130 million bond referendum on new infrastructure improvements. This bond included over \$38 million for projects in the zone.

2. National and Regional Trends

The trends impacting the Atlanta Region are summarized as:

- Robust Atlanta region economy
- Popularity of traditional inner city neighborhoods and the move toward new urbanism
- Reurbanization
- EPA non- attainment issues (i.e. air quality).

Reurbanization refers to the movement back to the City where there is a concentration of services and goods and people are closer to their places of work. The Atlanta region has second highest daily commute distance of US major cities which has resulted in violations of federal air quality standards which resulted in limited federal funds for new highway construction/ expansion (*see figure 1*). These violations helped many newcomers to settle in the City and traditional neighborhoods where there was physical infrastructure, traditional communities, short commutes, access to public transit, and a concentration of goods and services to support diverse qualities of life standards. Beginning with the '96 Games, the City began to experience a gradual reverse of population increase after 30 years of continued population decrease. These trends are now being supported by lending institutions. These institutions are now prompted by recent markets and the Community Reinvestment Act to pursue more balanced investments policies for lending and investing in neighborhoods that were previously ignored.

3. Atlanta Renaissance Program

To continue the development momentum created by the Olympic games with regard to population trends and market forces, the City in 1996 created the Atlanta Renaissance Program. A comprehensive study of the city's economic base was prepared by a nationally known firm and much of this study highlighted the economic strengths and weaknesses relative to competing cities and metropolitan areas. One of the major conclusions of the study was that housing and employment opportunities in the City were severely constrained by the relatively small size of the city's middle income population. A greater number of citizens in the mideddle income range provide the buying power necessary to support the range of retail and service activities associated with strong and sustainable neighborhoods. Two major goals proposed in the study were:

1. Increase the number of households with incomes between \$15-75,000, from 53% to 60-65% of the total city population within a 10-year period. This would mean moving 18,000-40,000 existing citizens, or new citizens, from the lower to the middle-income status.

2. Attract as many as 37,000 new middle-income residents to the City. The study showed that this meant adding 15-25,000 new/rehabilitated housing units valued between \$75-250,000 over the next 10 years. The study concluded that 40% of these units might be rental units.

EARLY SUCCESSES IN THE EMPOWERMENT ZONE

Housing

The Summerhill neighborhood is located directly across the street from Turner Stadium, which was formerly Olympic Centennial Stadium. It was the first EZ neighborhood designated for redevelopment prior to the '96 games. Revitalization of this neighborhood included substantial rehabilitation of existing units and construction of new condominium/townhouses and single-family units. Many of these units were completed just prior to the games and were rented out as additional Olympic accommodations. Later they were sold to new homeowners.

Economic Development

Simultaneously with the Summerhill Project, the EZ-CEAB approved new economic development initiatives, which included the revitalization of the Auburn Avenue commercial district and the Auburn Avenue Curb Market, located adjacent to the Martin Luther King, Jr. Historic District.

The CEAB also established the One Stop Capitol Shop, which was designed to “provide one-stop convenience for economic and business development information and assistance, with a strong focus on developing small businesses.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE EZ

The Southside Redevelopment Plan

The Southside Redevelopment area is located in NPU “Y” and consists of 7 EZ neighborhoods. The EZ provided funds to this consortium of neighborhoods to complete a redevelopment plan. One of the major factors in addition to redevelopment of existing neighborhoods was the presence of 200 acres of vacant land in the redevelopment area, which was within 2 miles of the downtown business district.

Public Participation

In 1999 the 7 neighborhoods began an active public participation plan to create a plan to guide future development of the project area. Over the next 18 months the 7 neighborhoods worked through a series of neighborhood planning committee focus groups. Community workshops were held with community residents, leaders, business owners and other public and private interests to outline a collective vision for the new century. These groups provided input into the development of an urban village, which includes new schools, parks/greenspace, and a hierarchy of neighborhood commercial uses and new diversity in the residential market to satisfy diverse income groups. The residential component of the plan included site-specific concept plans for new housing and housing rehabilitation projects.

Plan Elements

The Southside Plan created a community framework that also includes an economic development plan with entrepreneurial support for small businesses, a reverse commute program for higher paying jobs for residents and streetscape development for major corridors throughout the project area. Human service programs and programs for youth were also included in the plan. Neighborhood Community Development Corporations were created to manage and administer the implementation of projects that were approved in the plan.

Plan Implementation

The 7 neighborhoods as a consortium were able to receive a \$12 million redevelopment grant from the EZ to implement redevelopment projects. These funds were leveraged through collaboration with other agencies, in the City. The projects underway include:

- A \$35 million HOPE VI grant to demolish and rebuild the 105 acre Carver Homes public housing site that will include 768 new units of housing to include single family housing.
- High Point Estates, redevelopment of a former low-income housing site into a new residential community of single-family homes to include multifamily housing for seniors. This \$16 million project will build 109 new single-family homes and 75 seniors apartment units.
- The Park Place development, which is a \$10 million project to demolish a derelict multifamily complex and rebuild into a mixed-income community of condominiums, townhouses, live work mixed-use units, and seniors housing.
- The Joyland Shopping Center is a \$15 million project to demolish a rundown strip mall and replace it with a neighborhood commercial center to support the new developments and residents of the Southside project area.
- New and rehabilitated public schools to meet the needs of current and new residents, including a new \$6 million middle school.
- A citywide Quality of Life Bond referendum provides funds for new infrastructure needs, new sidewalks, trails, and improved neighborhood and community parks.

LESSONS LEARNED

New development in the City has produced an increase in property values, displacement of low-income homeowners and renters of all age groups and resulted in a change in the character of many intown neighborhoods. One of the results of this change was the creation of the Gentrification Task Force to address and create a comprehensive plan to preserve affordable housing while encouraging economic growth. The Task Force received input from neighborhood planning units impacted by these issues. Public hearings are taking place in various sections of the City. Citizen participation is one the most important aspects of the process.

Community Development Corporations in the neighborhoods were to provide affordable housing for low and moderate-income groups but due to market forces and development pressures most CDC's are selling homes at market rate. The EZ has at the same time made available to local residents several home buying assistance programs so that approximately 10% of the new residential units are affordable to low-moderate income residents.

Public /private partnerships and new policy solutions are required to preserve and create affordable housing. Various existing policies are being revised: fair share housing legislation, housing trust funds, housing enterprise zones, land banking, tax increment financing among others. Other policies such as inclusionary zoning, density bonuses are being considered. Public policy is being revised to ensure that mixed-income housing is provided throughout the City

Another issue is the reduced jobs/housing balance resulting from the exodus of traditional industrial uses from the city core to the suburban counties. These new locations provide lower land costs and taxes. The impact on the City is that these jobs are no longer accessible to the low income/low skilled zone residents since mass public transit is only currently available in two of the 10 metro counties.

Some of the solutions put in place to address these issues are: refocusing empowerment zone job training to high tech. These changes will provide a much needed labor pool to meet the needs of new industries establishing themselves in the City as industrial technology becomes more computer oriented.

The City has also partnered with Fulton County and the Atlanta Regional Commission to implement a Reverse Commute program as an interim measure to provide transportation for low-income residents to and from employment centers.

When we started working with the Empowerment Zone our intent was to improve the quality of life of EZ residents. We have exceeded expectations and now we have to revise and develop new policies and programs to ensure Empowerment zone residents can afford to stay in the inner neighborhoods.

References:

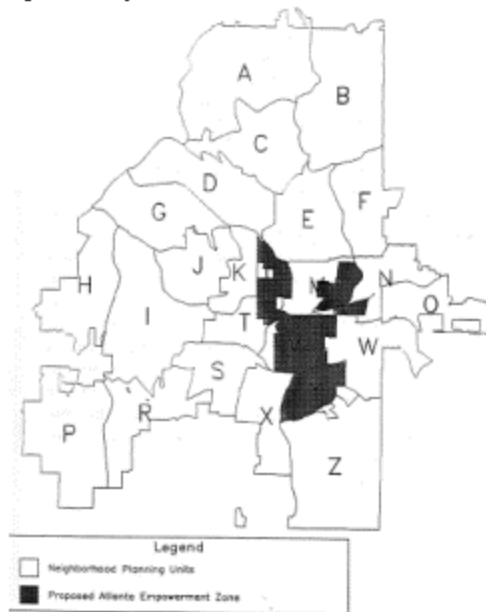
This presentation is based on the City of Atlanta Comprehensive Development Plan, years 1995 through 1996, and the Briefing Paper and Strategic Plan on the Atlanta Empowerment Zone Application, 1994.

City of Atlanta

Figure 1: Atlanta Region



Figure 2: City of Atlanta NPU Boundaries



Atlanta Empowerment Zone

Figure 3: Evaluation of Alternative Areas

Criterion	Area			
	Northwest	Eastside	Southeast	In-town
1. Population	49,484	49,576	49,099	49,998
Score	4	4	4	4
2. Land Area (square miles)	19.4	9.3	12.2	9.3
Score	4	4	4	4
3. Poverty Rate (%)	40.0	47.9	53.5	54.7
Score	1	2	3	4
4. Percentage of Tracts with Poverty Rate $\geq 35\%$	58	96	100	100
Score	2	3	4	4
5. Contiguous	YES	YES	NO	YES
Score	4	4	3	4
6. Children in Poverty in Female-Headed Households	7,129	7,837	9,513	9,318
Score	1	2	3	3
Total Score	16	19	22	23

Rating System
Degree of Disproportionality
Very Low
Low
High
Very High

Score
1
2
3
4

Figure 4: Empowerment Zone Neighborhoods



As Approved by the Community Empowerment Board, March 26, 1994.